

## **2015 Spring Raptor Migration at Fort Smallwood Park, Anne Arundel County, Maryland**

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For the second year in a row, the debut of the migration season was delayed by inclement weather, and arrival dates for most raptors were later than usual. In fact, arrival dates for Black Vulture, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, and American Kestrel were the latest, or tied for the latest, ever recorded in the 22-year span from 1993 to 2014. Despite the late start, 10,954 raptors were counted for the season, approximately 600 above the 10-year (2005-2014) average (Table 1). The number of days of coverage was 86, close to average, but the 464 hours of coverage were about 25 below average. The number of Bald Eagles tallied was a record 196, twenty-eight more than the previous record in 2013. Vulture numbers were substantially above their 10-year averages, as were numbers of Red-shouldered Hawks, Mississippi Kites, and American Kestrels. However, numbers of Ospreys, Northern Harriers, Sharp-shinned, Cooper's and Broad-winged Hawks, and Merlins were all notably below average.

**February:** The season officially began on 23 February during a period of snow, very cold weather and ice on the river. The first migrants, 5 Turkey Vultures, weren't observed until 25 February and unbelievably, that was the total for the month: five raptors during five days and ten hours of coverage, all well below average.

**March:** Moreover, that total stood until 7 March, when the migration finally seemed to get "its wings" and subsequently produced the best March since 2009, with 5200 raptors counted, a 38% increase over the 10-year average. Fourteen of the 22 days of coverage in March resulted in triple-digit or better counts. The "or better" refers to 21 March when 1221 raptors were recorded, including 1043 Turkey Vultures and 52 Red-shouldered Hawks.

**April:** The counts were about 550 below average, marked by a fizzle of the usual third-week bonanza. Accipiter numbers have now been anemic in April for four straight seasons. But, there was a big day of 1039 raptors counted on 11 April, with Northern Harriers (32), Sharp-shinned Hawks (123), Broad-winged Hawks (401), and American Kestrels (187) leading the way.

**Table 1. 2015 Monthly and Seasonal Count Summaries, Five-year Count Averages (2010-2014), and Ten-year Count Averages (2005-2014).** (Due to the rounding off of the individual five-year and ten-year species averages, they do not necessarily add up to the total five-year and ten-year averages.)

<b>Survey Days and Hours</b>	<b>Feb 2015</b>	<b>Mar 2015</b>	<b>Apr 2015</b>	<b>May 2015</b>	<b>Jun 2015</b>	<b>Total 2015</b>	<b>Five-year Average (2010-2014)</b>	<b>Ten-year Average (2005-2014)</b>
Survey Days	5	22	26	29	4	86	89	88
Survey Hours	10.25	118.00	146.25	174.25	15.75	464.50	507	489
<b>Species</b>								
Black Vulture	0	341	174	21	0	536	429	372
Turkey Vulture	5	4114	1925	682	10	6736	5446	5452
Osprey	0	113	239	56	0	408	436	459
Swallow-tailed Kite	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Mississippi Kite	0	0	0	13	1	14	10	7
Bald Eagle	0	24	52	114	6	196	141	113
Northern Harrier	0	9	57	9	0	75	79	99
Sharp-shinned Hawk	0	122	837	164	0	1123	1608	1810
Cooper's Hawk	0	95	140	39	0	274	377	430
Northern Goshawk	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Red-Shouldered Hawk	0	218	63	3	0	284	202	191
Broad-winged Hawk	0	0	528	117	1	646	528	730
Swainson's Hawk	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Red-tailed Hawk	0	107	98	32	0	237	234	263
Rough-legged Hawk	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Golden Eagle	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
American Kestrel	0	54	312	4	0	370	263	320
Merlin	0	2	26	9	0	37	57	57
Peregrine Falcon	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	5
Unidentified Accipiter	0	0	1	0	0	1	12	14
Unidentified Buteo	0	1	8	1	0	10	8	10
Unidentified Eagle	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Unidentified Falcon	0	0	2	1	0	3	3	4
Unidentified Raptor	0	0	2	1	0	3	15	18
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5200</b>	<b>4464</b>	<b>1267</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>10,954</b>	<b>9853</b>	<b>10,355</b>

May: The month was just a bit below average and featured 114 Bald Eagles, all but one of the 14 Mississippi Kites (Figure 1), and a notable rarity on 5 May — Swallow-tailed Kite. The Swallow-tailed Kite sighting was the seventh for the Park, but of greater import was that it was seen simultaneously with a Mississippi Kite, an unprecedented event.

June: A heat wave shortened June's coverage to just four days, and numbers were weak as a result, totaling just 18 raptors.



**Figure 1. Mississippi Kite, *Ictinia mississippiensis*.** Fort Smallwood Park, Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 30 May 2015. (Photographed by Dan Walker)



**Figure 2. Sandhill Crane, *Grus canadensis*.** Fort Smallwood Park, Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 25 May 2015. (Photographed by Dan Walker)

Other notable raptor sightings included an Osprey pair, nesting just outside the Park boundaries, whose nest-tree branch came down in a storm. The nest likely held eggs; luckily, it was rebuilt nearby soon afterward. With so many Bald Eagles around, sightings of multiple individuals at the same time were common, and synchronized aerial maneuvers and bouts of talon-grappling delighted observers on several occasions. Then there was the Sharp-shinned Hawk that came zooming up the path and passed startled observers at chair-level height.

Besides raptors, observers witnessed the migration of more than 4000 Canada Geese between 16 and 18 March, 1500 Canvasbacks on 13 March, 2 Little Gulls on 11 April, and a brief appearance of a Brown-headed Nuthatch on 10 May, the second record for the Park. Finally, there were two sightings of Sandhill Cranes, 2 on 15 May and 1 on 25 May (Figure 2). No new bird species were added to the cumulative Park list this season, but last year's report failed to mention a new species, Wilson's Phalarope on 4 May 2014. The Park total now stands at 264 species.

Special thanks to Hal Wierenga and Lynn Davidson, who found in storage some raptor data from the early years. We now have some numbers for 1988, which were altogether missing, and additions to several other years. The results are reflected in their revised Season Totals records.

The compiler, Sue Ricciardi, was greatly aided by a terrific crew of observers: Hal Wierenga and Lynn Davidson, Ralph and Jane Geuder, Mary Jane McMillan, Bill Hubick, Bob Rineer, Paul Fritz, Cal Orvis, Hugh Hoffman, Dan Haas, Greg Smith, Dan Walker, John Hoffman, Andy Smith, Steve Small, Carol Cwiklinski, Dan Stewart, Dave Mozurkewich, Steve Whitcomb, Dan Eberly, Dave Grove, Gene Wagner, Linda Baker, Harry and Liz Armistead, and Andy and Judy Higgs. Many other visitors also enhanced the count. The staff at Fort Smallwood Park extended their usual much-appreciated cooperation over the course of the season.

No doubt about it, the Spring 2015 raptor migration was memorable, complete with the thrills, surprises, mysteries, and unpredictable flights that keep observers wanting to come back for more. Luckily, 2016 is waiting to oblige.

*[Fort Smallwood Park is located in northeastern Anne Arundel County at 9500 Fort Smallwood Road, Pasadena, Maryland. It is situated at the tip of a peninsula where the Patapsco River and Rock Creek meet the Chesapeake Bay. The park is operated by the Anne Arundel County Department of Recreation and Parks. Additional Fort Smallwood Park information can be found at: <http://www.aacounty.org/RecParks/parks/ftsmallwood/index.cfm.>]*